ForeWord Reviews

HISTORY

The Speech: The Story behind Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Dream
Gary Younge
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Younge reminds us of the meaning of King's famous speech, and how it was not remembered until after his assassination.

"I have a dream" evokes memories of Martin Luther King Jr.'s iconic speech at the August 28, 1963, March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the last public remarks given during the tipping point of the civil rights movement. Gary Younge's book *The Speech* is inspired by two interviews the author held with Clarence Jones, who wrote the speech's first draft, and results in a sometimes sketchy often illuminating interpretation of its roots, meaning, and legacy.

Younge needs only a few words to get to the root of the matter, doing so with a gut punch as the topic requires. The first part of the book is a cursory overview of the civil rights movement, a subject too great to be framed in the few pages Younge devotes to it. Among the important points Younge reinforces, is that before King's speech, very few Americans were exposed to King's oratory. The speech was given to a live audience of a quarter of a million people—when only 100,000 were expected on the Washington Mall—and was covered live by all three major television networks. Congressman John Lewis, the then-chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), says King touched listeners with his message of hope in a way that was like "catching lightening in a bottle."

Indeed, this was a speech America needed to hear as the march came soon after George Wallace's posturing at the University of Alabama and just weeks before four schoolgirls were killed in a church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama. Younge is at his best when he carefully parses the speech. Here he defines the speech as "the most eloquent, poetic [and] unapologetic "assault on segregation." The author takes conservatives to task for claiming that the speech's most famous line, [that King's children] should "not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," shows that King was opposed to affirmative action and civil rights legislation.

Younge offers an insightful and unvarnished interpretation of the speech's aftermath, reminding readers that the speech was largely forgotten after the March on Washington. King, himself, had become marginalized by a restive black militant movement and by his white base for speaking out against the Vietnam War. The "I Have A Dream" speech was resurrected after King's assassination.

The author acknowledges the important roles of A. Phillip Randolph, who inspired the March on Washington and Bayard Rustin, who organized it. Perhaps more attention could have been devoted to Randolph. Still, Younge cannot be faulted for taking a narrower path, one that results in the author's concise, moving conclusion that although the speech was "not even close" in ending racism, it did help nail shut segregation's coffin, asking, "if nobody dreamed of a better world, what would there be to wake up to?"

Karl Helicher